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SUBJECT: MINORITY PARTIES FIND THEIR VOICE

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) Due to legislative changes enabling smaller ethnic minority parties to enter parliament more easily, several such parties find themselves for the first time in the Serbian parliament. Each has established itself as a potential ally of the democratic bloc of parties and has promulgated an ambitious platform and set of expectations for participating in the next government and/or parliament. These parties, with a total of eight seats, are unlikely to gather much attention from the major parties in the near term, but their budding voice in parliament ultimately bodes well for their prospects in local elections and increased participation at the state level in the future. End Summary.

ELECTION LAWS HELP THE LITTLE GUYS

12. (SBU) The Serbian election law -- amended in 2004, thus first applied in the January 2007 parliamentary elections -- allows ethnic minority parties to enter parliament with a "natural threshold" of 1/250 of the total turnout, not to exceed the percentage of the minorities' population compared to the general population (in practice, 12,000-16,000 votes per deputy seat, depending on turnout), rather than the 5 percent required of major parties. The Republican Election Commission also granted these parties a lower threshold of required signatures -- 3,000, vice the 10,000 demanded by the election law -- to put their candidates on the ballot in the recent elections. These provisions greatly increased the number of stand-alone minority parties in parliament, as only the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (SVM) acquired the requisite 10,000 signatures to craft a ballot, and none of the minorities gathered more than 1.3 percent of the vote.

HUNGARIANS: CONTENT TO SERVE IN OPPOSITION

13. (SBU) Josef Kasza's SVM -- which garnered the most votes of any stand-alone minority party -- earned three seats in parliament. He told us, though, that he is pessimistic about SVM's prospects of participating in government, partly because of bad blood between SVM and PM Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), which has categorically ruled out working with SVM. Laszlo Jozsa -- SVM official and president of the National Council of the Hungarian Ethnic Minority -- told us that the main obstacle to SVM's participation in government is the party's fear of sharing responsibility for losing Kosovo in the eyes of the public. SVM supports a cohabitation arrangement between DS and DSS -- which Kasza believes is the only ticket to a stable government -- but he said that, contrary to media reporting last week, he believes Kostunica's "sixth principle" on sharing government responsibilities lacks substance and is just an excuse to kick coalition negotiations further down the road.

14. (SBU) Kasza told us that SVM's priorities in parliament largely reflect the party's election platform, which is focused on proportional representation of Hungarians in state institutions and public enterprises, redrawing district borders to group the Vojvodina Hungarians more closely together, and implementing a law

on the function of national councils. He believes SVM's voice in two caucuses will increase the prospects of seeing these initiatives come to fruition and assuming a leadership position in at least one caucus. (Note: Kasza was referring to the minority caucus -- composed of two SVM representatives, two Bosniaks, one Roma, and one Albanian -- and the Vojvodina caucus, with one SVM official and four members of the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina, which entered parliament in a pre-election coalition with the Liberal Democratic Party. End note.) Jozsa told us that the SVM parliamentary representatives would push for representation in the education, culture, legislation, environment, and budget committees because of their pertinence to Vojvodina and available expertise within the party.

15. (SBU) SVM will pursue its initiatives under new leadership, as Kasza will step down from the party presidency on April 28 and take on an advisory role. While Kasza told us he is leaving his position because of personal priorities, Jozsa intimated that Kasza is disappointed in the election results in some of the Vojvodina municipalities and believes a new leader would maximize the chances of recovering votes in the next election. Kasza told us that his younger and more energetic successor, Istvan Pastor, should be able to solidify the party's voting bloc.

UGLJANIN'S BOSNIAKS: AT KOSTUNICA'S BECK AND CALL

16. (SBU) The Coalition of List for Sandzak (LZS) -- led by Novi Pazar strongman Sulejman Ugljanin -- has two seats in parliament. Presently aligned with DSS, Ugljanin has publicly expressed hope that the major democratic parties will achieve "good results, as the Kostunica government did." He indicated that his top priorities will be European integration and the full implementation of the new Serbian constitution, particularly the provisions for minority rights. He has not publicly declared expectations for a particular government post but has stated that he expects LZS to participate in

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government at all levels. We expect his overriding priority to continue to be seeking ways to undermine his nemesis, Sandzak Democratic Party (SDP) leader Rasim Ljajic, who entered parliament on the DS ticket and who will probably retain some version of his prior position of Minister of Human and Minority Rights.

ROMA: BRIGHT-EYED AND BUSHY-TAILED

17. (SBU) The January elections marked the first time a Roma party has succeeded in entering parliament, and the accession of two Roma parties indicates an even greater breakthrough for this oft-maligned minority group. Rajko Djuric's Roma Union of Serbia and Srdjan Sajn's Roma Party -- the only two of the 16 Roma parties to collect the requisite 3,000 signatures to get on the election ballot -- garnered sufficient votes for one parliamentary seat each. Both parties are expectedly elated about their new representation in parliament, pushing ambitious agendas, and optimistic about their prospects in the new government.

18. (SBU) Although Roma Union has typically been a silent DSS supporter, Djuric told us that he also expects DS to be a key ally; he lauded Tadic's platform as identical to the principles his Roma party endorses. Djuric declared that he will push for the rapid approval and implementation of an anti-discrimination law to benefit all minorities, as well as a government program for Roma, a regional economic development strategy, decentralization, and media reform. Party official Osman Balic told us that his party hopes to work with other minority parties to achieve these initiatives. Balic said that the party has requested a place in six ministries: education, social, health, housing, interior, and local administration. He expects Roma Union to receive either the chairman or assistant chairman posts in the Education Ministry, the Social Ministry, or both, as a consolation prize for not chairing the more important ministries.

19. (SBU) Sajn was equally ambitious but a bit more pragmatic with us. He told us that he has asked to participate in those ministries he believes would directly benefit Roma -- capital investments, education, and health -- but has not requested and does not

anticipate receiving ministerial or deputy ministerial positions. He said he expects to work closely with DS and has been pleased with the results of negotiations thus far. He said he is not sure which caucus he will join, as he believes that the minority caucus is purely a technical means of allowing these groups a voice in parliament and expects each representative to vote as he wishes [Note: He is probably right. End note.]. He opined that the DS caucus or the Vojvodina caucus might present a more stable option for his party. Like Djuric, Sajc indicated a strong desire for an anti-discrimination law, which would include coordination with religious communities and other minority groups. He also listed as priorities a national strategy on child care, representation of socially vulnerable groups in parliament, and legislation governing education, health, housing, political integration, and security of Roma. He did not appear optimistic about working with Roma Union, citing differences in fundamental principles.

ALBANIANS: IT'S LONELY AT THE TOP

¶10. (SBU) The presence of Riza Halimi -- chairman of the Presevo Albanians coalition -- in parliament represents a watershed decision by the Albanian minority in Serbia to participate in the elections. Halimi has already weathered and rebutted invective from the Radicals and Socialists -- Dacic singled him out for vitriol related to Kosovo during the constitutive session of parliament -- as well as ethnic Albanian rivals in Presevo Valley who do not support participation in the Serbian government. Halimi has sought out allies in other minority parties, as well as DS, to ensure that his voice is heard during his uphill struggle, which will only become more challenging after the settlement of Kosovo. DS has publicly and privately pledged its support to Halimi and his coalition partner, and early reports are that the success of Halimi has sent rejectionist leader Ragmi Mustafa flailing about for any support from the international community as he seems to feel increasingly marginalized.

¶11. (SBU) Halimi told us he does not expect to hold a government position but believes DS will incorporate the principles he conveyed during informal negotiations (DSS has not contacted him). He hopes to serve on the education committee in parliament -- he was a professor for 20 years -- as well as those related to security and administration. Others in his caucus tend to support DSS, so he emphasized that political independence within the caucus will be key to making the caucus work. He told us that his chief priority will be the reinstatement of a coordination body for southern Serbia, for which he expects DS support, and he told OSCE officials that he hopes to promulgate a new law on national minorities and decentralization. He told us that he has asked for more ethnic Albanian participation in state and local institutions -- including customs, tax, and border agencies -- and believes DS will support legislation to encourage increased connectivity with Pristina, particularly in the area of education.

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COMMENT

¶12. (SBU) The presence of minority parties in the Serbian parliament is a major step forward for these underrepresented, democratic-leaning polities, and we will look for more participation from these groups in the next round of parliamentary elections. So far these officials are holding their own in a challenging political climate, refusing to shrink away from controversy. They are developing the ability to provide ambivalent voters from their constituencies with an alternative to the major parties and force the parties in power to pay attention to their needs. We expect their stalwartness to play well in their home districts and, we hope, translate into increased votes in local and municipal elections.

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